



HIDDEN TREASURES CLOSE to HOME

by Sen. Lincoln Chafee

From November to March each year, a stiff wind blows across the coastal shrubs and grasses at Rhode Island's Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge. At times, it seems to come with a frigid blast straight off the North Atlantic. Powerful, icy blue waves explode upon the rocky coast and, even on clear days, the sun's weakened rays often do not provide much comfort.

Yet this rugged peninsula is home to the second largest wintering population of harlequin ducks on the East Coast. Every year, these marvelous ducks escape Labrador's deep freeze and fly down to Rhode Island, where the periwinkles are plentiful and where they can take shelter from storms on the rocky outcroppings just offshore. The males stand out among all the sea ducks, with their warm chestnut sides and slate blue breast and neck, offset with precise black and white lines that give them a "painted" look.

In spite of the penetrating chill, human visitors also flock to Sachuest Point, wearing a few more layers than the ducks perhaps, but equally in need of rest and recharging. Peering through binoculars and spotting scopes, birders delight in watching the little harlequins surf the waves, and marvel at their daring maneuvers as they always just manage to dodge the jagged rocks. Even their simple act of feeding raises everyone's spirits: Rafts of these clownish ducks dive underwater in a seemingly choreographed sequence, and then pop back up to the surface as if they were spring-loaded. I try to get down to Sachuest Point at least once a year to look for the



Rhode Island's Sen. Lincoln Chafee.



A red fox on the rocks at Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge in Rhode Island.



Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge is home to the second largest population of wintering harlequin ducks on the East Coast.

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harlequin ducks, and each time, I am reminded of just how important our national wildlife refuges are for wildlife and people alike.

Tiny Rhode Island is fortunate to have five national wildlife refuges within its borders, four of which are within 45 minutes of downtown Providence. Totaling just over 2,400 acres, they are not home to grizzly bears or whooping cranes or vast elk herds, but they nevertheless have an important role to play within the National Wildlife Refuge System. In Rhode Island, the System's mission is fulfilled in the great diversity of habitats and species that our refuges protect and through the accessibility to nature that they provide to individuals and families.

Most Rhode Islanders won't have the chance to travel to the Arctic Refuge or Pelican Island, but they can get to Sachuest Point or Trustum Pond. Refuges across the country – regardless of their size – give all of us the opportunity to encounter the majesty of the natural world. There, we can discover the inherent value of the flight of butterflies over a meadow, the song of a warbler calling through the forest, or the appearance of weasel tracks in the snow.

Wildlife refuges offer simple yet profound lessons about the recovery of endangered species, the potential for habitat restoration, and the epic migrations of songbirds and shorebirds. Through their local experiences, refuge visitors begin to see the connections between habitat and wildlife, and cherish the sense of security that comes with knowing that a natural area has been set aside forever.

Once people see their own refuge as a special resource, I believe they transfer that same value to other lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System. They start to look for the blue goose signs when they travel around the country and contribute to a growing interest and passion for wild, unspoiled places. As the Refuge System enters its second century, it is this shared, public enthusiasm that will ensure that wildlife and its habitats are preserved for future generations.

Sen. Lincoln Chafee, R-RI, is chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water, which has jurisdiction over the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Wildlife Refuge System.